

RUSSIA

St. John of Shanghai

The commemoration day of the saints who shown forth in the Russian land show us that spiritual heaven under which the Russian land was created and lived. Before Holy Prince Vladimir, in the Russian land lived disparate pagan tribes who were constantly at war with each other. Holy Prince Vladimir brought them a new faith, a new inner spiritual state; he gave them a new, all-uniting spirit of life, and thus was one nation formed.

The very existence of the Russian people is bound up with the birth in them of spiritual life, with their assimilation of the foundations of a Christian worldview. It is senseless to look for meaning and goals in earthly life, which ends in death. We have to strive to assimilate the divine, grace-filled, eternal life, and then also build this temporal, earthly life: *But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you* (Matt. 6:33).

Faith, the Orthodox Church, united disparate tribes into one people, and the most essential quality of the Russian people became faith in the Kingdom of Heaven, the seeking of it, the seeking of truth. For the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, for the sake of becoming a part of it, for the sake of prayer, Russian ascetics left worldly vanity for the forests and uninhabited islands. They sought only the Kingdom of God, did not want to found or build anything, departed from people, but people followed after them for the sake of the Kingdom of God, lived on those islands and in those forests near the righteous ones, and thus were lavras and monastic communities formed.

The search for truth is the main thread of Russian life, and it is no accident that the first written collection of laws, which were intended to order life, were called *Russkaya Pravda* —“Russian Truth”.^[1] But not only those who left the world and the company of people thought about the Kingdom of Heaven. All the faithful Russian people understood the meaning of life. All who truly built Russia as a nation, living in the world and fulfilling their duties, also considered that the most important thing was to be true to the Divine Kingdom and Divine Truth.

In Russia there were princes, commanders, lords, and commoners, but their main understanding, striving, and meaning in life was also the acquisition of the Kingdom of God and their becoming a part of it. St. Alexander Nevsky spent his whole life in military and state exploits; he rode horseback throughout of Siberia to the Tatar khan in order to build peace in

Russia. He was glorified by his military victories, but when he fell ill and was near death, he accepted death as freedom from the labors of his earthly life and gave himself over to what was dearest of all to his soul. He received the monastic tonsure so that he might enter his desired Kingdom of God, no longer as an earthly warrior, but as a warrior of Christ.

St. John (Maximovitch) of Shanghai and San Francisco.

Prince Theodore of Smolensk also received monasticism before his death. Such spiritual leaders of the Russian people in their striving for the Kingdom of God are the

best expression of the main feature of that people's spiritual life—the main strength, which directed its historical life. Their assimilation of the Christian faith gave rebirth also to Russian princes.

Authority is always the expression of consciousness and will. Authority is always guided by one or another philosophy, one or another understanding of the goals and meaning of life and its activities. Before St. Vladimir, Russian princes were chieftains of warring tribes and conducted wars for the sake of military glory and booty. After becoming Christian, they became the leaders of separate parts of one nation. After receiving Christianity, the awareness and perception of unity appeared. Truth, or righteousness was in the brotherhood of princes, and internecine wars became unrighteousness.

Holy Prince Vladimir gave the Russian people a new meaning in life and new vital strength. Catastrophes, misfortunes, and defeats are powerless before the main strength of life, before a life that is spiritual. The Kingdom of God and the spiritual joy of participating in it remain untouched. A terrible storm passes, and man lives once more. Thus the martyrs smiled with the joyful feeling of God's grace during even the cruelest tortures. This is the life force of Russia. Calamities do not defeat its heart. The Tatars put all of Russia to the torch. Kiev fell, and in the same year Novgorod rose and the great commander and leader of the Russian people, Right-Believing Prince Alexander Nevsky, lifted up the Russian people for battle with the Tatars, who were tearing apart the body of Russia, and with the Catholic Swedes, who took advantage of Russia's calamity and wanted to seize the Russian people's soul, to kill the spiritual strength of the Russian people and Russia. For Alexander Nevsky, the primary need was to preserve that spiritual strength.

The history of the rise of Moscow is a clear confirmation of that same thought. At its inception, Moscow was a small, local cluster of settlers. But at its head were right-believing princes who had assimilated the revealed Orthodox understanding of truth; and therefore, when Holy Hierarch Metropolitan Peter told the prince that Moscow will grow and the hierarch himself will live and be buried there if the prince will build in Moscow the House of the Most Holy Theotokos, the prince fulfilled that commandment. In other words, St. Peter said that if you will be faithful to Orthodoxy to the end, and first of all seek the Kingdom of

Heaven and its righteousness, then all of the secular, worldly, and state affairs will added unto you. That was the plan for Moscow, and it was faithful to St. Peter's commandment. And the nighttime military roll call on the Kremlin walls was carried out with the words, "Most Holy Theotokos, save us." This does not mean that the life and the people were saintly! Oh, no! People are always sinners, but it is important, and salvific, when there is an awareness of good and evil, when there is a striving for the truth; for then it is possible to rise from the abyss of a fall. Sinful Moscow, the capital of sinful Russia, in its historical life would fall to the bottom but then arise, because the awareness of truth did not die.

During the Time of Troubles, Russia fell so low that all its enemies were sure that it was mortally wounded. In Russia there was no tsar, government, or army. Power in Moscow was in the hands of foreigners. People were "faint of heart", weakened, and looked to foreigners for salvation, before whom they kowtowed. Its demise was inescapable, and Russia would have inevitably perished, if the awareness of Truth had been completely lost. But Russia and the Russian people were saved by St. Hermogenes [Germogen]. The enemies of Russia held him captive in a dungeon of the Kremlin, mocked him, tortured him, and tried to make him submit to them, to change the Russian understanding of Truth. St. Hermogenes was tortured to death, but he never gave in spiritually, and called Russia to its historical path of a Christian nation with a Christian government; he called all to remember the Truth and to be faithful to it.

In his faith and spiritual and moral confession, St. Hermogenes gave rebirth to the Russian people, and it again stepped onto the path of seeking the Kingdom of Heaven and its righteousness—the righteousness of submitting earthly state life to the spiritual source. And Russia arose.

It is not possible to find in history such a depth of a nation's fall and such a rapid, miraculous rising of it within one year, when the people spiritually and morally rose. But such is the history of Russia and its path. After Peter I [the Great], Russian society strayed away from the Russian path. Although it did not do so entirely, it lost the clarity and awareness of the truth, the clarity of faith in the Gospel truth: *Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.*

The Russian peoples' terrible sufferings are the result of Russia's betrayal of its own self, of its own path and calling. But those terrible sufferings, the languishing in life under the power of fierce warriors against God says that the Russian people had not completely lost its awareness of truth, that the unrighteousness of the atheistic regime and government is spiritually and morally hard for it to bear. Russia will arise just as it has arisen before.^[2] It will arise when its faith is ignited. When people spiritually arise, when the clear, steadfast faith in the truth of the Savior's words will once again become dear to them: *Seek ye first the*

kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Russia will arise when it comes to love the faith and the confession of Orthodoxy, when it sees and loves the Orthodox righteous ones and confessors.

Today, on the day of all the Saints Who Shown Forth in the Russian Land, the Church points to them, and the Orthodox with spiritual exaltation see what a great multitude of them there are in the Kingdom of God! And how many more there are who are not canonized—they are without number.[3] Metropolitan Vladimir of Kiev goes quietly and fearlessly to his death. The murderers take him out of the gates of the [Kiev Caves] Lavra in order to murder him outside the city, just as they killed the Lord Savior, and the holy hierarch silently, like a sheep to the slaughter, receives death for Christ, for the faith, for the Russian Church, and because he sought first of all the acquisition of the Kingdom of God and eternal life.

There are a multitude of martyrs and confessors, and again we see God's blessing on their *podvig* of faith, again the manifestation of incorrupt relics: the bodies of the righteous who already live according to the laws of the future life, where there is no suffering or corruption, and the incorruption of their relics bears testimony to that. Thus, the incorrupt remains of Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna, which rest in the Gethsemane Convent, bear witness to us of her righteousness in God's eyes.

Russia will arise when it lifts its gaze and sees that all the saints who shown forth in the Russian land are alive in God's Kingdom, that in them is the spirit of eternal life and that we must be with them, spiritually touch and partake of their eternal life. In this is the salvation of Russian and the **whole world**.[4]

There is no spirit of life or joy of life in Russia [under the Communist yoke]. Everyone is afraid of it, like they are afraid of demons. Russia was also earlier terrible to its enemies, but then it was because it drew other peoples to itself.

Faithfulness to the commandment, *Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness* created the Russian humility, humbled its authorities; and during the days of Russia's greatest earthly glory the Russian government through the lips of Emperor Alexander I confessed that it was a Christian government. On the monument to its glory he wrote, *Not unto us, O Lord, but unto Thy Name* (Ps. 113:9).

The Russian heaven, the Russian saints call us to be with them, just as they are with us. They call us to participate in the spirit of eternal life, and the whole world thirsts for this spirit. The restoration of Russia is needed by the whole world from which the spirit of life has departed, and which shakes in fear as before an earthquake.

Russia awaits a Christ-loving army, a Christ-loving tsar and leaders, who will lead the Russian people, not for earthly glory, but for the sake of faithfulness to the Russian path of truth. *Not unto us, O Lord, but unto Thy Name.* In repentance, faith, and in its purification may the Russian land be renewed, and may Holy Rus' arise.

From the book, *Vladyka John—Holy Hierarch of the Russian Diaspora* (Sretensky Monastery).

St. John of Shanghai

Translation by Nun Cornelia (Rees)

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[1] In Russian, especially old Russian, the word *pravda* means truth, but also righteousness and lawfulness.

[2] This sermon was of course given while Russia was still under the Communist yoke, and St. John's words were prophetic. Russia did indeed throw off that yoke and is experiencing a spiritual rebirth.

[3] This is before the canonization of the Holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia.

[4] Emphasis by O.C.